

the skillful use of language is essential not only for academic
to achieve your professional goals as well.

In her essay "Writing for an Audience," Linda S. Flower, Professor of
Carnegie Mellon University, confirms that writing is an act of
connection and connection between creator and consumer—the
the reader. She makes us intensely aware that we are always
service of an audience. Emily Badger makes it clear in "Plain
Engaged to Limit Federal Bureaucracy" that direct, accessible
writing is not just a "civil right" but can also save the government a lot of
money. In the same vein, the article "Washington State Sees Results
from 'Plain Talk' Initiative" by Rachel La Corte provides compelling
evidence of how use of simple and direct language can really benefit the
audience targeted by bureaucrats: the public. In "The Art of the Police
Report," Ellen Collett discusses how even a fact-based document such as
a police report can skillfully utilize language to convey a particular—
and, perhaps, biased—point of view; what might seem like neutral, im-
partial language on the surface can be as effective as a weapon in getting
a point across. Finally, Anne Trubek strikes a hopeful note in her essay
"We Are All Writers Now," observing that with the rise of nonprofes-
sional writing in online venues, the culture of writing is thriving more
than ever today.

Language: A Reader For Writers
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Linda S. Flower Writing for an Audience

Linda S. Flower is Professor of Rhetoric and Co-Director of the Center for
University Outreach at Carnegie Mellon University. Her experience mentor-
ing teenage writers led her to a deeper investigation of how writers make
peace with conflicting voices and goals, and how teachers must consider
and manage those struggles as a result. This work inspired Flower's re-
search on intercultural rhetoric and education for community consequences.
The following selection, "Writing for an Audience," is excerpted from her

text, *Problem Solving Strategies for Writing*. In this piece, Flowers discusses
the writer's goals, one of which is not to *impart* knowledge per se, but to
share knowledge; to consider the audience in the writer–reader relationship;
to persuade the reader to see things as the writer sees them, even if the
reader might not necessarily agree with the writer's perspective.

✦ To what degree do you consider your audience when you write?

The goal of the writer is to create a momentary common ground
between the reader and the writer. You want the reader to share
your knowledge and your attitude toward that knowledge. Even if the
reader eventually disagrees, you want him or her to
be able for the moment to *see things as you see*
them. A good piece of writing closes the gap
between you and the reader.

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Analyze Your Audience

The first step in closing that gap is to gauge the distance between the
two of you. Imagine, for example, that you are a student writing your
parents, who have always lived in New York City, about a wilderness sur-
vival expedition you want to go on over spring break. Sometimes obvious
differences such as age or background will be important, but the critical
differences for writers usually fall into three areas: the reader's *knowledge*
about the topic; his or her *attitude* toward it, and his or her personal or
professional *needs*. Because these differences often exist, good writers do
more than simply express their meaning; they pinpoint the critical differ-
ences between themselves and their reader and design their writing to
reduce these differences. Let us look at these areas in more detail.

Knowledge. This is usually the easiest difference to handle. What does your
reader need to know? What are the main ideas you hope to teach? Does
your reader have enough background knowledge to really understand you?
If not, what would he or she have to learn?

Attitudes. When we say a person has knowledge, we usually refer to his conscious awareness of explicit facts and clearly defined concepts. This kind of knowledge can be easily written down or told to someone else. However, much of what we “know” is not held in this formal, explicit way. Instead it is held as an attitude or image—as a loose cluster of associations. For instance, my image of lakes includes associations many people would have, including fishing, water skiing, stalled outboards, and lots of kids catching night crawlers with flashlights. However, the most salient or powerful parts of my image, which strongly color my whole attitude toward lakes, are thoughts of cloudy skies, long rainy days, and feeling generally cold and damp. By contrast, one of my best friends has a very different cluster of associations: to him a lake means sun, swimming, sailing, and happily sitting on the end of a dock. Needless to say, our differing images cause us to react quite differently to a proposal that we visit a lake. Likewise, one reason people often find it difficult to discuss religion and politics is that terms such as “capitalism” conjure up radically different images.

- 5 As you can see, a reader’s image of a subject is often the source of attitudes and feelings that are unexpected and, at times, impervious to mere facts. A simple statement that seems quite persuasive to you, such as “Lake Wampago would be a great place to locate the new music camp,” could have little impact on your reader if he or she simply doesn’t visualize a lake as a “great place.” In fact, many people accept uncritically any statement that fits in with their own attitudes—and reject, just as uncritically, anything that does not.

Whether your purpose is to persuade or simply to present your perspective, it helps to know the image and attitudes that your reader already holds. The more these differ from your own, the more you will have to do to make him or her *see* what you mean.

Needs. When writers discover a larger gap between their own knowledge and attitudes and those of the reader, they usually try to change the reader in some way. Needs, however, are different. When you analyze a reader’s needs, it is so that you, the writer, can adapt to him. If you ask a friend majoring in biology how to keep your fish tank from clouding, you don’t want to hear a textbook recitation on the life processes of algae. You expect a friend to adapt his or her knowledge and tell you exactly how to solve your problem.

The ability to adapt your knowledge to the needs of the reader is often crucial to your success as a writer. This is especially true in writing done on a job. For example, as producer of a public affairs program for a television station, 80 percent of your time may be taken up planning the details of new shows, contacting guests, and scheduling the taping sessions. But when you write a program proposal to the station director, your job is to show how the program will fit into the cost guidelines, the FCC requirements for relevance, and the overall programming plan for the station. When you write that report your role in the organization changes from producer to proposal writer. Why? Because your reader needs that information in order to make a decision. He may be *interested* in your scheduling problems and the specific content of the shows, but he *reads* your report because of his own needs as station director of the organization. He has to act.

In college, where the reader is also a teacher, the reader’s needs are a little less concrete but just as important. Most papers are assigned as a way to teach something. So the real purpose of a paper may be for you to make connections between historical periods, to discover for yourself the principle behind a laboratory experiment, or to develop and support your own interpretation of a novel. A good college paper doesn’t just rehash the facts; it demonstrates what your reader, as a teacher, needs to know—that you are learning the thinking skills his or her course is trying to teach.

Effective writers are not simply expressing what they know, like a student madly filling up an examination bluebook. Instead they are *using* their knowledge: reorganizing, maybe even rethinking their ideas to meet the demands of an assignment or the needs of their reader.

Analyze

1. In the first paragraph, Flower talks about writing as an exchange between the reader and the writer. Do your own experiences as a writer support this view? Why or why not?
2. Examine Flower’s point that “people accept uncritically any statement that fits in with their own attitudes—and reject, just as uncritically, anything that does not.” Consider whether or not this is a valid point of view.
3. Flower states that it helps to know the “attitudes” or mental orientation of the reader. How would you go about constructing your argument if you knew your reader’s attitude was very different from your own?